
DIGITAL TOOLS FOR DEMOCRATIC CITIZENSHIP: ENHANCING SOCIAL STUDIES TO COMBAT HUMAN TRAFFICKING IN NIGERIAN TERTIARY INSTITUTIONS

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Abstract

This mixed-methods study analyses how digital tools increase democratic citizenship teaching and human trafficking awareness in Nigerian tertiary institutions. Grounded on Democratic Citizenship Theory, Critical Pedagogy, Technological Pedagogical Content Knowledge and the Digital Citizenship Education Framework, the study draws on data from 317 students and 38 lecturers across three Colleges of Education. Quantitative results showed that exposure to digital tools was a strong predictor of democratic learning outcomes, accounting for 42% of the variance ($R^2 = .42$, $F(3, 313) = 74.88$, $p < .001$). The main predictors were digital tool usage ($\beta = .38$), lecturer support ($\beta = .31$), and student digital literacy ($\beta = .17$). Digital civic involvement also explained 39% of the differences in trafficking knowledge ($R^2 = .39$, $F(3, 313) = 66.41$, $p < .001$). Exposure to civic media ($\beta = .43$) had the most influence. The chi-square test showed that using digital platforms is strongly linked to feeling more at ease talking about civic issues ($\chi^2 = 27.43$, $p < .001$).

Qualitative themes showed that digital platforms help people have safer conversations, think about ethics, and develop a civic identity that is focused on justice. The NCCE and Ministry of Education should mandate integrating digital tools and civic media into Social Studies curricula to enhance democratic learning and anti-trafficking awareness.

Keywords: Digital citizenship, Civic education, Human trafficking, Tertiary institutions, Nigeria

Introduction

Nigeria is still dealing with a lot of human trafficking, which violates people's rights and hurts the country's democracy (Amadasun, 2022). Tertiary institutions are typically seen as places that help people become more active citizens, but they are becoming more vulnerable as trafficking targets young people who are poor, don't know how to use technology, and don't know much about civic issues. At the same time, growing ideological and political disparities on campuses makes it harder to have the open conversations that are necessary for democratic education (Okolocha, 2023).

In this light, Social Studies has a democratic duty to teach civic values, critical thinking, and the ability to fight structural injustices like human trafficking. But most of the time, the way teachers teach is still very didactic and not connected to what students are going through (Ogunjimi & Atoba, 2021). Recent research has shown that digital tools like virtual team teaching (Ayantunji et al., 2024a), civic documentaries (Makanjuola et al., 2021), and inclusive digital techniques can be used to rethink how we teach civics. These tools let people learn by doing and think about ethics, and they also help people become more digitally resilient so they can fight trafficking and defend democratic values.

This study looks at how digital tools might change Social Studies classes in Nigeria's Colleges of Education to help students learn more about human trafficking and encourage them to participate in democracy in a country that is divided along ideological lines. Based on critical pedagogy and digital citizenship ideas, the study

calls for a change from passive civic learning to civic learning that is focused on justice.

Traditional lecture-based Social Studies classes are still common at Nigerian colleges. This makes it challenging for pupils to objectively evaluate societal issues like human trafficking. The widening ideological and ethnic gap on college campuses weakens civic education and democratic discourse. Even while digital tools can change things, their strategic use in Social Studies instruction is unclear. This study addresses this gap by investigating how digital technologies might foster justice-focused citizenship and raise awareness of human trafficking in split classrooms.

Social Studies helps citizens become aware, involved, and fair-minded in democracies. This is crucial in Nigeria, where ethnic and political tensions make citizen cooperation difficult. Democratic citizenship in college courses boosts civic tolerance, critical thinking, and social responsibility (Tuhuteru, 2023). These aims reflect new team teaching and inclusive pedagogy ideals. Ayantunji et al., (2024a) found that virtual teacher cooperation improves civic education and engages students in tough social topics.

Human trafficking exploits structural disparities in Nigeria and other sub-Saharan African countries. Many believe that education can reduce trafficking by raising awareness, changing attitudes, and inspiring protests (Ebubedike et al., 2025). Documentary storytelling and multimedia civic education help pupils relate trafficking to their lives. Makanjuola et al. (2021) used videos to educate people about the environment. This method could also raise trafficking awareness.

Digital technology is becoming more important in civic education worldwide. E-learning platforms, virtual reality (VR) simulations, artificial intelligence (AI) chatbots, and gamified learning improve empathy, engagement, and community involvement (Banik & Gullapelly, 2025). Ayantunji et al., (2024b) discuss how digital inclusion may aid Nigerian marginalised people. They also demonstrate how virtual team education can spark civic discourse. Teaching students about cybersecurity (Makanjuola & Ayantunji, 2024) helps them be ethical, safe, and well-informed digital activists.

Nigerian higher education is divided like the nation. Ethnic, political, and religious divides hinder campus interaction and civic

discourse (Titus & Ogundiya, 2025). Open, conversational teaching methods are needed to overcome this. Technology-based collaborative Social Studies instruction builds trust and equips students to question institutions and democracy.

However, four connected theoretical frameworks supported this study, promoting digital technologies in civic learning that emphasises justice in Nigeria's higher education institutions. The course begins with democratic citizenship theory of Westheimer and Kahne (2004). It defines personally accountable, participative, and justice-oriented citizenship. This paper encourages schools to teach kids to question inequality and work together to address it. Second, Freire's 1970 model of Critical Pedagogy emphasises dialogical and liberatory education. It empowers students to investigate and change social systems that enable human trafficking and inequality by making them active information co-creators. Third, the technological pedagogical content knowledge (TPACK) framework (Mishra & Koehler, 2006) shows how to integrate digital technologies. Teachers can integrate technology, material, and teaching methods to create rich, relevant, and responsive civic learning experiences with TPACK. The digital citizenship education framework (Ribble, 2012) concludes with civic technology's morality. Students must learn to act responsibly and advocate for justice online as they spend more time online. This study investigated how to use digital tools in Social Studies classes in a way that helps students become better citizens and learn more about human trafficking in Nigeria's divided colleges and universities. The specific objectives are to:

- i. examine the extent to which digital technologies enhance democratic learning in Social Studies within Nigerian tertiary institutions;
- ii. assess the impact of technology-enhanced civic education on students' awareness and attitudes toward human trafficking; and
- iii. investigate how socio-political contexts affect the teaching and learning of democratic citizenship in Social Studies.

Research Questions

1. How can digital technologies enhance democratic learning in Social Studies in Nigerian tertiary institutions?

2. What is the impact of technology-enhanced civic education on students' awareness and attitudes toward human trafficking?
3. How do socio-political contexts influence the teaching and learning of democratic citizenship in Social Studies?

Methods

In this convergent parallel mixed-methods study, structured surveys collected quantitative and classroom observations qualitative data. Cross-checking results strengthened them and showed how digital tools may help Nigeria Colleges of Education students learn civics and fight human trafficking. Eleven lecturers and 650 students attended Federal College of Education, Abeokuta; 15 lecturers and 450 students attended Federal College (Special), Oyo; and 12 lecturers and 435 students attended Federal College (Technical), Akoka Slovin's formula calculated the student sample from all 38 lecturers' census:

$$n = \frac{N}{1 + Ne^2}$$

Where:

n = sample size

N = total student population (1,535)

e = margin of error (0.05)

$$n = \frac{1535}{1 + 1535 (0.05)^2} = \frac{1535}{48375} \approx 317$$

Stratified proportional sampling assigned 317 students to universities. Abeokuta had 134, Oyo 93, Akoka 90. Data was acquired utilising standardised instructor and student questionnaires. The questionnaires have open-ended prompts and closed-ended Likert scale items. Digital tools, civics, and human trafficking were discussed. Classroom observation tracked digital tool use, education, and civic debate. Both expert reviews and pilot study with 10 professors and 30 students from a non-participant school showed strong content and face validity. Cohen's Kappa of 0.70 assessed observation methods' inter-rater reliability, while Cronbach's alpha of 0.70 tested the questionnaire's internal consistency. Combining quantitative and qualitative data increased construct and ecological

validity. Descriptive statistics (means, frequencies, and percentages) and inferential statistics (ANOVA to compare civic activity across institutions and regression analysis to assess trafficking knowledge and digital citizenship) were used. Chi-square tests explored categorical relationships when applicable. To examine qualitative classroom observations, Braun and Clarke (2025) used inductive thematic analysis. New educational, digital, and civic communication patterns inspired codes. Triangulation ensured consistent, trustworthy, and contextual findings from both data sources.

Results

Research Question 1: How can digital technologies enhance democratic learning in Social Studies education in Nigerian tertiary institutions?

Table 1: Multiple Regression Predicting Democratic Learning Outcomes from Digital Tool Usage

Predictor Variable	B	SE B	β	t	P
Constant	1.81	0.25	-	7.24	< .001
Digital Tool Exposure (DTE)	0.36	0.07	.38	5.14	< .001
Lecturer Digital Support (LDS)	0.28	0.06	.31	4.67	< .001
Student Digital Literacy (SDL)	0.19	0.08	.17	2.38	.018

Model Summary: $R^2 = .42$, Adjusted $R^2 = .41$, $F(3, 313) = 74.88$, $p < .001$

Table 1 shows that the regression model was a good predictor of democratic learning outcomes, with $F(3, 313) = 74.88$, $p < .001$, explaining around 42% of the variance. All three predictions were important: Digital Tool Exposure ($\beta = .38$) was the strongest predictor, which means that students who use digital tools a lot (like team teaching platforms and civic media) are more likely to learn about democracy. Lecturer Digital Support ($\beta = .31$) was also a strong predictor, which shows how important it is for teachers to model good behaviour for students. Student Digital Literacy ($\beta = .17$) was a small but important contributor.

Thematic Analysis

Braun and Clarke's (2025) theme analysis methodology were used to

look at classroom observations and open-ended answers from 355 students and teachers. There were three key themes that came up:

Civic Empowerment Through Digital Dialogue: Internet tools, digital surveys, and group projects gave students a say in civic issues: "We had more say when we used online tools everyone could contribute even if they were shy" (Akoka student). According to Critical Pedagogy, students create civic knowledge.

Bridging Ethnic and Ideological Gaps: The barrier was less visible because "When we use WhatsApp groups or Google Classroom, students from different tribes talk to each other more freely than when they meet in person" (Oyo lecturer). This shows that digital technologies diminish campus ideological gaps.

Instructor Influence as Civic Role Models: A lot of people liked teachers who employed digital case studies and simulations. A student from Abeokuta said, "Our instructor showed us a DVD about trafficking and led a discussion. Everyone took part. This backs up the TPACK and Digital Citizenship frameworks and stresses how important teachers' digital skills and morals are. When digital tools help with actual civic challenges, teachers become guides and mentors, and students work together across differences. Both the regression and theme results demonstrate that these kinds of approaches promote democratic learning. This is in line with Westheimer and Kahne's justice-oriented citizenship and Freire's dialogic model, which prioritises student agency and critical voice.

Research Question 2: What is the impact of technology-enhanced civic education on students' awareness and attitudes toward human trafficking?

Table 2: Regression Predicting Human Trafficking Awareness from Digital Civic Engagement

Predictor Variable	B	SE B	β	t	p
Constant	1.53	0.24	-	6.38	< .001
Exposure to Civic Media (ECM)	0.41	0.06	.43	6.83	< .001
Digital Civic Projects (DCP)	0.29	0.07	.27	4.14	< .001
Instructor-led Reflection (IDR)	0.25	0.08	.21	3.12	.002

Model Summary: $R^2 = .39$, Adjusted $R^2 = .38$, $F(3, 313) = 66.41$, $p < .001$

As shown in Table 2, 87.4% of students who took part in digital civic education said they would intervene or report suspected incidents of human trafficking, compared to 62.3% of students who did not take part ($\chi^2(1, N = 317) = 11.68, p < .001$). The regression model explained 39% of the difference in trafficking awareness ($R^2 = .39$). Exposure to civic media had the biggest effect ($\beta = .43$), followed by participation in digital civic projects ($\beta = .27$) and reflection led by an instructor ($\beta = .21$). These findings show how important narrative tools like documentaries and structured internet engagement are for raising awareness and getting people to take action against human trafficking.

Thematic Analysis

Three main themes came out of the open-ended comments and classroom observations:

Empathic Engagement Through Multimedia: Civic movies helped students "feel the pain behind the facts." "I only heard about it. But genuine stories changed my view of victims" (Oyo student). Multimedia can start affective learning, which is crucial to doing the correct thing.

Action-Oriented Civic Identity: Student digital civic campaign leaders said they went from awareness to advocacy. "We made a WhatsApp group after the assignment to keep talking about trafficking in our communities" Student from Abeokuta. Freire (1970) felt students could change stuff.

Critical Reflection as a Learning Catalyst: Students said that guided online chats helped them work through tough problems. One student said, "Our teacher made us think about what we saw and asked us what we could do." Digital Citizenship and TPACK both stress how important it is for instructors to teach students about digital ethics. Westheimer and Kahne's (2004) model of justice-oriented, ethical civic learning says that as students use immersive civic media and think critically, they become more aware of trafficking.

Research Question 3: How do socio-political contexts influence the teaching and learning of democratic citizenship in Social Studies?

Table 3: Chi-Square Test of Association to determine the relationship between comfort level in civic discussions and use of digital platforms

Civic Discussion Comfort	Comfortable	Uncomfortable	Total
Digital Platform Use			
High digital use	129	59	188
Low digital use	37	92	129
Total	166	151	317

$\chi^2(1, N = 317) = 27.43, p < .001$

The chi-square result was statistically significant, indicating that students who used digital civic tools like asynchronous discussions, polling apps, and forums were more likely to discuss issues even when they disagreed. This suggests that Nigerian campuses may be less discriminated than they appear.

Thematic Analysis

Three main themes came up when we looked at open-ended survey answers and classroom observation notes:

Digital Spaces as Equalizers: Pupils repeated that digital channels let them express their political opinions without judgement: "Political or tribal pupils dominate class. Everyone can chat online; we're just names." (Oyo student). Critical Pedagogy seeks to dismantle school power structures.

Fear of Social Repercussions: For reputation or penalty, many students avoided civic debate in class. A pupil said, "If you talk too much in class, people assume your tribe or political party." (Akoka student). This shows how ethnicity and ideology can divide classroom discussions.

Lecturer Caution and Self-Censorship: Lecturers often stayed away from delicate civic themes since they could cause problems: "Sometimes I skip examples that might sound political, even though they are important" (Abeokuta instructor). When these kinds of problems aren't handled well, it makes it harder to learn and teach. This shows how important it is to have neutral civic platforms. In Nigerian institutions, socio-political differences make it hard to have civic conversations. Digital tools can make participation safer and more open, though, by allowing people to participate anonymously or

at their own leisure. These methods help make conversations more equal when they are moderated well. The digital citizenship education framework supports safe, ethical online interactions, which is in accordance with Freire's call for empowering education and the democratic citizenship theory's focus on safe, participative, and justice-oriented civic expression.

Discussions

The results showed that digital tools greatly improve the understanding of democracy and trafficking among Social Studies students at Nigeria's postsecondary institutions. Students who used civic media a lot and had help with their lessons were more involved in civic activities and thought more about right and wrong. This is in line with what Ayantunji et al. (2024a) found that virtual team-teaching encourages critical conversation. Makanjuola et al. (2021) also talked about how multimedia documentaries might improve emotional learning and civic awareness. Using digital forums also lowered tensions between different ethnic and ideological groups, making civic discussions safer. This supports Freire's (1970) focus on dialogic pedagogy. But worries about lecturers censoring themselves show the problems that Okolocha (2023) talked about when he said that Nigerian colleges have rules that make it hard for people to speak their minds. These results back up the idea that civic technology can change things.

Conclusion

Drawing on anchored in democratic citizenship theory, critical pedagogy, TPACK, and the digital citizenship education framework combining methodologies with data from three federal colleges reveals that, when used deliberately, digital civic tools develop critical thinking, empathy and civic agency. Quantitative findings underlined civic media and cooperation as democratic learning predictors. Qualitative research turned out internet environments as safe havens for delicate civic subjects. When properly included into teaching, digital tools support justice-oriented research, civic resilience, and engagement despite political fragmentation.

Recommendations

The study recommends a full and reform-oriented approach is necessary to fight human trafficking and encourage students to be responsible citizens. The National Commission for Colleges of Education (NCCE) should change the Social Studies curriculum to add lessons on digital citizenship, civic media, and stopping trafficking. These kinds of improvements to the curriculum will provide future teachers and students the skills they need to deal with difficult civic and digital issues. Also, teachers should be helped to learn how to use new tools for interactive teaching, colleges of education should make digital pedagogy workshops a requirement. The Ministry of Education should also work with ICT organisations to help create platforms that are in line with the curriculum, such blogs, forums, and virtual reality environments, where students may talk about civic issues like human trafficking without revealing their identities.

Digital civic education could also be a part of national programs like NAPTIP's youth programs to raise awareness and encourage people to be on the lookout. Also, groups that work on education and human rights should support the use of civic technology in anti-trafficking legislation by writing policy briefs. This will help Nigeria's digital empowerment through education even more.

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